

## Health care reform supporters pack Duarte town hall meeting

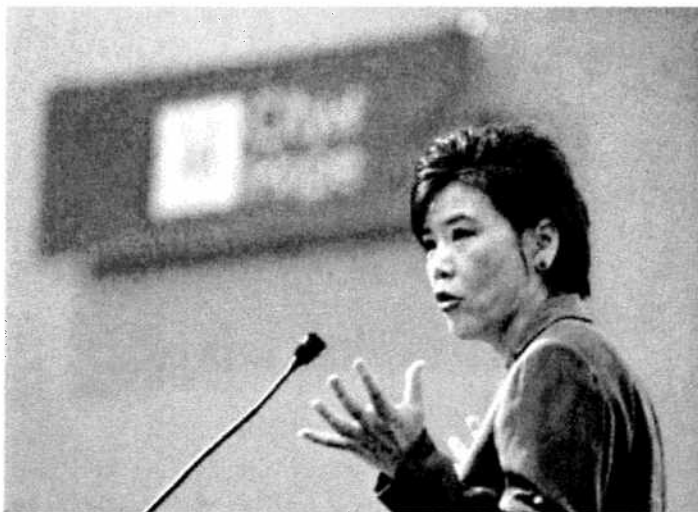
By Rebecca Kimitch, Staff Writer  
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DUARTE - Hundreds of supporters of health care reform packed a town hall meeting on Saturday, showing strong support for government-backed health insurance and change within the health care industry.

The forum was hosted by Rep. Judy Chu, D-El Monte, and drew about 500 people to the City of Hope auditorium.

With the exception of a handful of attendees, the crowd showed overwhelming support for reform and the "public option" - a proposed new government-backed health insurance plan similar to Medicare.

"We must have a public option," Chu said. By providing competition to private insurance companies, it "will keep insurance companies honest ... and premiums low," she said.



*Rep. Judy Chu speaks during a town hall meeting on health care reform where she expressed her support for a public option Saturday, August 29, 2009 at the City of Hope in Duarte. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz)*

The health care reform packages currently making their way through Congress aim to provide health insurance for the nation's 46 million uninsured. Generally they would require all

Americans to get insurance and require employers to provide it, with a few exceptions. They would provide greater subsidies for the poor who cannot afford insurance.

They would also prohibit insurance companies from refusing coverage to people for pre-existing conditions and increase regulation of the health insurance industry.

The House reform package also includes the development of the public option - which now appears in jeopardy because of widespread public opposition.

Throughout the region and the nation, town hall forums similar to the one held Saturday have drawn strong sentiments against reform.

But Chu is one of approximately 70 lawmakers to sign a letter saying she will not support a reform package that does not include a public option.

She reiterated that stance Saturday, but not everyone was sold.

"This was a waste of time," said Sierra Madre resident Judy Keifer, who left early. "It was just them singing to the choir."

Her husband, Skip, questioned the lack of discussion.

The event's panel featured Chu and four health care insiders who all support reform - a pediatrician and representatives from the Hospital Association of Southern California, AltaMed Health Insurance, and the AARP.

"Does Chu not represent any of her constituents besides those in her party?" Skip Keifer asked.

Pasadena resident Jason Capell said the crowd reflected the Democratic nature of Chu's district. He also said it represented voices that have not received enough attention during this month's national dialogue on health care.

"The message needs to get out there that are a lot of constituencies that want reform," Capell said. "The news keeps covering these people in opposition ... but I think we are in the majority."

Chu said that coverage is what drew so many people in favor of reform to her town hall.

"People are sick and tired of all the negativity toward reform ... and that is what has been getting all the publicity," she said.

"I want to take your feedback that I get here today and take your message back to Washington, D.C.," she told the crowd.

The congresswoman said her district, which stretches from East L.A. to Covina, is in particular need of reform.

Approximately 33 percent of people in the district lack health insurance, Chu said. That is nearly double the statewide average of 19 percent.

Though the crowd was generally supportive of reform, concerns were raised about how the government would pay for the estimated \$1 trillion package.

"It will not increase our deficit," Chu responded.

She said the costs would be covered by creating more efficiency in Medicare and through placing a "surcharge on the wealthiest Americans."

Skip Keifer scoffed at that answer.

"How many wealthy people do you think there are?" he said.

But others said the price was worth it.

"How much did we spend on Iraq?" asked Jim Lott of the Hospital Association of California.

"We should invest in the health and welfare of our people before we go to other countries."

[rebecca.kimitch@sgvn.com](mailto:rebecca.kimitch@sgvn.com)

(626) 962-8811, Ext. 2105